

## EDWARD PURCELL

### THE FIRST PHYSICIAN IN MINNESOTA

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**I**N the year 1819 the Fifth United States Infantry was stationed at Fort Gratiot, near Detroit, under command of Col. Henry Leavenworth. On the tenth of February of that year an order was issued that the Regiment proceed to the upper Mississippi, and on April 13th a supplementary order directed that the command proceed to Fort Howard, thence by way of Green Bay, the Fox and Wisconsin rivers to Prairie du Chien. When the expedition left is not known, but it arrived at Prairie du Chien on June 30. The object of our government in sending troops into this northwest country is stated in a letter written by Surgeon Edward Purcell, a major in the Medical Department of the army, and at that time with the Fifth Infantry. The letter is as follows:

Detroit, March 20, 1819

Dear Brother,

I now write and most probably for the last time from this place. Not many days since I received information from the Surgeon General that the requisition I had made out for the Regiment for the current year had been received and that medical supplies would be directed to my care on the Mississippia, probably the Falls of St. Anthony.

A few days after I received this letter Major General Macomb, commanding the Department of the Army, arrived from Washington City and brought the orders that our Regiment should march for the mouth of the River St. Peters, which emptys into the Mississippia, as soon as navigation is open, which will be

by the first of May. The St. Peters is in North Latitude about the 45th, three degrees further North than this post. It is in that part of the country inhabited by the Indians called the Soux (pronounced "Soos"). They are a warlike and powerful tribe, but as our Indian affairs now stand, we have nothing to fear from them. The intention of our Government appears to Garrison the whole of our North and North West frontier; this with the view of cutting off British influence amongst the Indian tribes and protecting our frontier settlements, a very laudable intention. Our Regiment Garrisons, three Posts, one to be at the mouth of the St. Peters, which will be headquarters, and where I shall be stationed, one at the Prairie Du Chien (or dog meadow) and one at Fort Armstrong, about two hundred and fifty miles below the last mentioned place. As the Regiment is composed of 10 companies, we shall have 8 at Head Quarters and one at each of the other Posts. This will give us a very good society as we shall have at least 20 officers at our Post and many have wives. You may think it strange that I have consented to go with the Regiment out of the world, as you may call it, but the fact is I go, not because I like it, but because I think I can make money. I shall at least make as much as will pay for my lands in the course of three or 4 years and this will be doing much. During that period of time you need not expect to see me, and as for communications by letter, I will in my next inform you how to direct, in the mean time I wish you to write me as soon as you receive this and direct it to this place.

It is thought that we shall not get more than two thirds of our way this summer, and that we shall be obliged to remain



FIG. 1. SURGEON EDWARD PURCELL, U.S.A., THE FIRST PHYSICIAN TO PRACTICE IN MINNESOTA. COURTESY OF MISS MARY CALDWELL PURCELL.

400 miles on the Mississippi below our intended post this winter. We go by way of Mackinaw and Green Bay, pass up from Green Bay, the Fox River, then cross over to the Ouisconsin, descend this river until we arrive at the Mississippi, this river will bring us out at the meadow of dogs, where no doubt we shall winter, and the next spring ascend the 400 miles until we arrive at our destined post.

We shall be obliged to build our barracks etc. etc., also a saw and grist mill. No doubt we shall live as much like farmers as Soldiers. I leave my lands in charge of an agent at this place by name, Henry J. Hunt, whose father has been a Colonel in our army & himself now a respectable Merchant & Citizen in Detroit. He will not only have charge of the lands that I own in this Territory but of a town lot in Parysburgh on the Miami of Lake Erie containing two acres, one town lot in the County town on Monroe

on the River Raisin in the Michigan Territory, for which has been paid in full 100 dollars, also the deeds and patents of two quarter sections of land in the Illinois Territory, each containing 160 Acres, both amounting to 320 acres, together with some horses, Cows, Furniture, etc. etc. I mention this that in case any accident should happen to me, you may know where to apply to obtain my papers. I have also on an Island called "Hersens" at the mouth of the River St. Clair, near to where I purchased my lands, four horses and on the main a few miles up the River one mare, at my house that is within two miles of Fort Gratiot, I have one or two cows, some pigs, house-hold furniture and axes, saws, etc., etc. etc. These are in charge of a tenant whose name is Ebenezer Shaw. It is my intention to remain in the Army five years longer, when I shall resign and go into private life, during this space of time we shall no doubt remain at the same post on the Mississippi. It was my intention did I remain at this place to visit you next summer but as affairs now stand, its utterly impossible. I have heard nothing of Lipton. Present my love to Father, Sisters Margaret & Anne.

Edward Purcell

As previously stated, the command reached Prairie du Chien on June 30. The journey to Green Bay was probably made by steamboat and the rest of the journey to the Mississippi by hand-propelled boats. At Prairie du Chien the expedition waited for Major Thomas Forsyth to arrive from St. Louis. On August 8 the troops, consisting of ninety-eight rank and file, embarked in fourteen batteaux and two large boats. In addition to these there were Major Forsyth's boat and the Colonel's barge. Twenty boatmen also accompanied the party. How many persons the barge and boat contained is not stated. On August 23 the Colonel and some of the boats reached

the present site of Mendota at the mouth of the St. Peters river, as the Minnesota was then called, the majority of the flotilla arriving the next day.

It seems remarkable that this journey was made in fifteen days. The boats were what were known as Keel boats. When the nature of the river bank permitted, they were dragged by ropes and when not they were propelled by poles. In September one hundred and twenty recruits and officers arrived from Boston; so that in the winter of 1819-20 the personnel of the post could not have much exceeded two hundred and fifty. The troops immediately on their arrival began to erect log cantonments at the present site of Mendota, where the first winter was spent. The following spring the encampment was moved to the Springs on the left bank of the Mississippi, a short distance above the present bridge. In 1821 the log fort near the present site was occupied but not completed. The post was called Fort St. Anthony till 1825 when it was named Fort Snelling after Col. Josiah Snelling who succeeded Leavenworth in command in 1820.

After this perhaps unnecessarily prolix introduction let us take up the subject of this paper, Edward Purcell, the first physician to practice medicine within our present Minnesota, though this part of the country at that time was part of Michigan Territory. Of Purcell's early life we are ignorant. It is known, however, that one Edward Purcell came to America from Ireland with his five children and settled in Virginia. This Edward Purcell was the father of our doctor. The mother, née Frances Lipton, had died on shipboard and was buried at sea. The year of the immigration is un-

known but the first Federal census of 1790 gives him as the head of a family of five living in Hampshire County, Virginia, so Doctor Purcell must have been born previous to that date. The family later moved to Pennsylvania where Edward Purcell the elder died May 8, 1836, in his seventy-fifth year. The name on his tombstone was spelled Percall and was accented on the last syllable.

As Doctor Purcell was the third of the five children and all were born in Ireland, we possibly are at liberty to place the date of his birth previous to 1785 and as he was married in 1808 that would make him at least twenty-three years of age at that time and twenty-eight when he entered the service of the United States as Surgeon's Mate on May 2, 1813. On April 18, 1818 he was promoted to Post Surgeon and on July 21, 1818 Major and Surgeon of the 5th Infantry. The accompanying portrait of Edward Purcell shows him in the uniform of a Major. It could not then have been painted previous to 1818. In 1819 he came to Minnesota and there was no one at Fort Anthony, during his residence there capable of painting such a portrait, furthermore it is stated that his effects after his death in 1825 at Fort Snelling never reached his family. However, he was on leave of absence for a period in 1824 so that it is possible that the portrait may have been painted at that time. Assuming that the portrait shows him as a man thirty-five to forty years of age, that again places the date of his birth about 1785. As this portrait is now in possession of his descendants it is obvious that he did not have it with him at Fort St. Anthony nor was his family with him at that post, nor apparently were they with him at

Fort Gratiot, as one may infer from no mention being made of them in his letter to his brother quoted in the beginning of this sketch. His wife was an Elizabeth Shirk. Three children were born of this union, the youngest a son named John, born in 1812, was grandfather of Miss Mary C. Purcell of Manhattan, Kansas, to whom the writer is indebted for the genealogical material, the two letters and a copy of the portrait. Of Doctor Purcell's medical education nothing is known. Examinations of medical men entering the Army were established early in the Revolutionary War, but were allowed to lapse thereafter so there is no record of his qualifications. The regulations of the Medical Department for 1814 provided for examination of candidates not graduates "from a respectable medical school or college" but that was after Purcell entered the service. His military record as furnished by the Surgeon General and Adjutant General's offices contain no information regarding him other than that already given except that he was appointed from Virginia and was at Fort Mifflin in 1814, that he was ordered to Fort Gratiot on May 18, 1817 and was retained as Major and Surgeon June 1, 1821, there having been another reorganization of the Army at that time. The reason perhaps that but little is known about Purcell by these offices is because the records of Fort Snelling to 1857, when the post was temporarily abandoned, never reached Washington. My inference is that they were then sent to St. Louis, remained there and were destroyed during the disturbance incident to the Civil War. Despite this lack of information much may be gained from other sources. In 1816 James Mann published at Dedham,

Massachusetts, "Medical Sketches of the Campaigns of 1812-13-14." This book is one of the first American books on military medicine and is credited with influencing many reforms regarding the Medical Department of the Army made in 1818. The book contains two articles by Surgeon's Mate Purcell, one a description of the illnesses affecting the men under his care at the time the sick were evacuated from Plattsburg to Burlington, Vermont, on September 5, 1814, and the other, shorter than the first, narrates three case histories of soldiers suffering from a disease of the mouth. Probably we would now diagnose the illness of these men as Vincent's angina. He describes his treatment as futile till he prescribed Fowler's solution, which proved efficacious. As regards the sick removed from Plattsburg, they were about 815 in number, fifty of them wounded. They were transferred to Crab Island, but as no adequate provision had been made there for them, Dr. Purcell on his own initiative succeeded in removing them to the hospital at Burlington in open boats, across the lake, a distance of twenty-five miles. From this time till he was at Fort Gratiot we have no information regarding his station.

Of his activities at Fort Snelling government records are also lacking. Our Minnesota histories all record the fact that the garrison there during the first winter suffered severely from scurvy, a common complaint in isolated army posts at that time. The disease was also prevalent during the second winter. As regards this Prescott's<sup>1</sup> and Mrs. Adams's<sup>2</sup> statements must be accepted as the most authentic as Prescott was there in the early spring of 1820 and Mrs. Adams was at Fort Snelling in 1823. Sibley's<sup>3</sup> state-

ment is hearsay evidence and Mrs. Van Clive<sup>4</sup> was less than a year of age at that time. Folwell,<sup>5</sup> who apparently examined all sources of information states:

The cause of this sudden and violent outbreak of disease was attributed to the villainy of certain contractors or their agents, who drew the brine from the barrels of pork to lighten the loads on leaving St. Louis and refilled them with river water before delivery at Fort Snelling.

In a footnote to the above he says, "The number of fatalities is variously given. Mrs. Van Clive estimates that forty succumbed, Sibley that nearly one half the command perished." Prescott says that "some fifty or sixty had died and some ten men died after I arrived." Mrs. Van Clive tells of the relief obtained by the use of "spignot root," doubtless spikenard, then and now abounding in the region. Prescott attributes the abatement of the malady to "the groceries which he brought and a quantity of spruce that Doctor Purcell had sent to the St. Croix for." It would seem to me that spikenard root would be difficult to find in the winter with snow on the ground and that the other account is nearer the truth. Mrs. Adams also says the flour and cornmeal issued the soldiers had been ruined by dampness and many of the men refused to eat it. Let us now turn to the report of the Surgeon General<sup>6</sup> for the year 1820 which no Minnesota writer appears to have consulted:

At St. Peters the prevailing disease was scorbutus . . . It appears from the official reports, that the troops at St. Peters . . . were exposed to many of the causes both predisposing and exciting of scurvy. During their progress . . . from Green Bay up the Mississippi they were not

infrequently obliged to labor in the water beneath the rays of an ardent sun, sleeping in their wet clothes and exposed to a damp atmosphere impregnated with malaria, they became reduced by disease; and in this state of predisposition to scurvy they began, late in the season the establishment of their winter quarters . . . at St. Peters . . . they were destitute of groceries and vegetable food, except flour and corn which were more or less damaged from having been wet; and their animal food, which was principally salted, they were obliged to eat during a portion of the winter in a putrescent state. This condition of the meats, however, was as far as practicable corrected by washing and boiling in charcoal.

The report also states that in the last quarter of 1819 there were but forty-two deaths, from all causes, in the Northern Division, one-half of which were at St. Peters. The report then goes on to say:

The number of men reported at Camp Missouri on the first of January 1820 was 788 and at St. Peters 228, making an aggregate of 1016. The total of cases (of all illnesses) for the first quarter at these two points was 895; of these 503 were of a scorbutic character and the number of deaths from this cause was 168.

As this is a joint report on the troops at Fort Snelling and Council Bluffs one cannot assign any definite number of deaths to either post. I may add that the rations furnished the troops at Council Bluffs were as bad as those at Fort Snelling. There was another cause for the scurvy, however, not mentioned by the Surgeon General, and that was the liquor ration, then regularly issued to each soldier. Mrs. Adams says, "Whisky rations were issued to the troops regularly, however, and sometimes it seemed that

about all they had was whisky." At a slightly later date we find in some of the official correspondence between the commissary officer at Fort Snelling and the Commissary General at Washington a suggestion by the latter that an additional allowance of 1500 gallons of whisky be added to the former's requisition for supplies "in order to keep the soldiers contented." I may say that the Medical Department of the Army had been actively opposing the whisky ration for some years before this time, having noted its deleterious effect, particularly during the war of 1812. In 1830 a vegetable ration was substituted for whisky.

From 1822 to 1826 the health of the garrison at the fort was good. There were but two deaths between September 1822 and September 1823, six in 1824 and seven in 1825. What was the life at Fort Snelling in these early days? In the summer hunting was the principal amusement and furnished diversion for both officers and men. In the winter or from the time the river froze till the ice ran out in the spring there was no communication with the outside world and often no mail. All were closely confined of necessity to the barracks and life must have been monotonous in the extreme. Intemperance, a fault of the time, both among the officers and men, was almost universal and produced deplorable effects, quarrels and even duels between the officers. White feminine society was practically lacking. But four women were at the post the first winter and not many more later. But Indian women were plenty and complacent. Practically all the unmarried officers had mistresses among the wigwams and some of the few married officers were not exempt from this diversion. Some acknowl-

edged them as wives, but the greater number did not. Many had half-breed children.

In 1824 Purcell was away on leave and the following letter is preserved, written to him by his Hospital Steward. Evidently things were not going well at the hospital. It depicts, between the lines, social conditions at the post.

June 5, 1824.

Dear Doctor:

In consequence of what has happened between yourself and me I venture to address you familiarly, although contrary to military etiquette. Since your departure from this post, no exertions on my part have been wanting to arrange your business in proper order. I found many articles of your property in different places, which I have collected and taken care of. I have taken from your room, two trunks, one of which I delivered to Mr. Gibson, and the other to Mr. McKenzie, also some letters for Mr. Gibson. It is with a deference to him, that I would speak of Mr. Gibson, his manner of managing affairs is in my humble opinion calculated to do no great honor to myself or service to his employer. I need not mention some of his habits to which he is addicted as you are well acquainted with his general conduct for some time past and I will only say there is no reformation. He places no confidence in those who are under his direction; wishes to manage every minute particular concerning the hospital himself, yet he appears entirely ignorant of the manner of doing it and his domineering position is not calculated to gain him much information. I shall obey his orders promptly so far as I am bound to do it, unless they are prejudicial to your welfare, in which case I shall feel a pleasure in protecting property for which you are responsible, and promoting your interest at all hazards. Were it not for the numerous obligations which bind me to your interest and the anticipation of

your return to this post, I would immediately resign the situation in which it appears I am not considered by Mr. G. worthy of that consideration which you have reposed in me, and in which I venture to say you have never been deceived. Amenable to the Colonel's orders of the first and third instances, I can do no more, no less than duties assigned to a hospital steward by the regulations, which does not exactly agree with your private instructions to me. I have said nothing to the Colonel upon the subject, considering it was my duty to obey and not my business to inquire into the Commanding officer's reasons for issuing his orders. I have been explicit in stating circumstances which I would wish may be in confidence for your own particular information, and that if on your return you did not find me at the hospital you may not be disappointed.

I have omitted many circumstances relative to Mr. G.'s conduct which affect my own feelings and I shall endeavor to bury them in oblivion. Since your departure from this post, there has been a vacancy in my mind which no substitute can fill which you will no doubt perceive from the tenor of my letter. My spirits are dejected and my health rather declining in consequence of the contemplated situation which I am placed. The affairs of the hospital I have managed in the usual way as far as I have been permitted. It is a general time of health at the post. If it is consistent with your views please favor me with an answer to this letter. Be pleased to accept my affectionate esteem and best wishes for your welfare.

I am, Sir,

Very respectfully  
Your obedient servant  
Perrin Barker

p.s. The land patent which you left in my care I have an opportunity of selling for ——— provided I could obtain a lawful convey within two months.

Respectfully yours,  
Barker

N.B. Mr. Graham has returned from his ——— up the St. Peters in good health and wishes to be remembered to you. He regrets that he could not have seen you before your departure and says that in consequence of want of time before the mail closes he cannot write to you, but that he will write at the first opportunity.

Yours etc.

P.B. I have made two additions to this letter already and I will now add that what may happen to effect my own feelings I have resolved to remain in my present situation for your interest and hope for better times.

Dr. E. Purcell

P. B.

Among the papers of Alexis Bailly, an early trader here, in the Minnesota Historical Society, may be found two references to Purcell. The first, dated at St. Peters July 17, 1822, is an agreement between Edward Purcell and Peter Powell, the latter indenting his son William to Purcell for a period of three years as a servant, Purcell to clothe, maintain and lodge him and pay him four dollars per month. The second item is a memoranda of goods sold to Purcell by Bailly. It is worth giving in full as it shows the prices prevalent in the wilderness and the cost of transportation.

Alexis Bailly Dr. Doct. Purcell

1823

Augt. 26—to 2 prs. Socks	1.50
“ 1¾ yd. blk. Silk	2.63

1824

Jany. 20 “9 galls. Brandy @	
3.50	31.50
“ 1 keg to contain it	.75
“ 2½ yd. Sup. fine	
cloth	30.00
“ 1 pcs. Callico 28	
yd. 50¢	14.00
Transportation of the	
above to St. Peters	3.50

Dolls. 83.88

Bailly also makes a memorandum that he is to purchase a clasp for Dr. Purcell but could not get one.

In a letter among the Johnson papers in the Carnegie Public Library at Sault Ste. Marie, dated at the Falls of St. Anthony Feb. 19, 1824, to a Mr. George Johnson, Purcell regrets that his duties had made him "unable to pay more attention to you than I have. . . . I present to you with this scrawl a Lancett, it may be of use to you in the woods, it has been in my possession for many years." George Johnson was a fur trader and later Indian agent.

In 1823 one John Marsh came to Ft. Snelling as tutor to Colonel Snelling's children. Dr. George D. Lyman in his book "John Marsh, Pioneer" suggests that March may have studied medicine under Purcell. If this was so then we must credit Purcell as the first to give medical instruction here.

There remains but little more to be told except that Doctor Purcell was the first United States officer to die in Minnesota, and also the first physician. The cause of his death is not recorded but it is said to have been sudden. He was buried at the post cemetery at Fort Snelling. Some thirty-

five years ago the cemetery was moved and all records of burials in the old cemetery are now lost. Although Purcell died January 11, 1825, it was not till 1830 that administrators of his estate were appointed by the court of Wayne County, Michigan (at Detroit) and the final probate papers bear the date 1832. Strange to say the only information regarding him in these prolonged proceedings is that he was "late of the United States Army." No title, no date of death, no place of death, nor are any heirs mentioned either by name or implication. The only statement is that \$1425.96 remained to be distributed.

#### REFERENCES

1. *Minn. Hist. Coll.*, 6: 478.
2. *Ibid.*, 6: 95.
3. *Minn. Hist. Coll.*, 1: 473.
4. Three Score Years and Ten.
5. History of Minnesota. Vol. I.
6. Statistical Report of the Sickness and Mortality in the Army of the United States compiled from the records of the Surgeon General's and Adjutant General's offices, embracing a period of twenty years from January 1819 to January 1839. Prepared under the direction of Thomas Lawson, M.D. Surgeon General, Washington, 1840.

