

Women's History Month: L. Anna Ballard, MD

L. Anna Ballard, MD, 1848-1934

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Lydia Anna Ballard was born on July 21, 1848, in Lansing, Michigan, only two months after her parents and seven siblings had arrived in covered wagons from Ohio (two more siblings would be born after her). She grew up on a farm outside of the newly designated state capital and attended local schools, including the Michigan Female College, which had been founded in 1855 to provide higher education for women at a time when they were generally excluded from state public schools. Ballard worked as a schoolteacher for two years before her interest turned to medicine. In 1871, she began working at her brother-in-law's drugstore in the neighboring town of DeWitt, where she clerked and learned the practice of medicine. Two years later, she enrolled in a medical course at the University of Michigan, only three years after it began admitting women.

The idea of women attending medical school was still controversial in the mid 1800s. Many members of the all-male faculty at Michigan (as with most schools) believed women were not physically or emotionally capable of handling the rigors of medicine. Perhaps because of this, in 1877, Ballard moved to Chicago to attend the Woman's Hospital Medical College, the first medical school in the Midwest to admit and graduate women. It would affiliate with Northwestern in 1892, retroactively making all of its graduates Northwestern alumni. Ballard earned her MD from the school in 1878, at age 30. She stayed in Chicago for another year, working at the Women and Children's Hospital, first as a physician in the hospital and then as a visiting physician, traveling to destitute women who were too ill to get to the hospital. This focus on the well-being of women would continue throughout her life.

Ballard returned to Lansing in 1879 to care for her aging parents. She set up her own private practice and, in doing so, became the first female physician in the city of Lansing. Belying the treatment that a woman in medicine might have expected to receive, looking back years later, Ballard remembered Lansing's male doctors welcoming her into the community. As a reflection of the respect she garnered, the beloved oldest physician in the city selected Ballard to read his eulogy upon his death in 1889, with the local medical society's endorsement. Ballard became a popular and busy practitioner herself in central Michigan and was involved in many organizations, including the medical societies of Lansing, Ingham County, and Central Michigan. Around the time she returned to Lansing, Ballard began living with Adelaide Berridge, a music teacher, who would be her companion for the rest of her life.



Ballard as a young woman. Via [Find a Grave](#).



Ballard later in life. Via [Find a Grave](#).

Like many women in medicine in the late 19th century, Ballard was involved in many progressive women's causes, including temperance and industrial aid, which aimed to help workers in an increasingly industrialized world. She also became the state Superintendent of Social Purity and Legislation for the Women's Christian Temperance Union, an organization not just advocating for abstinence from alcohol, but also for women's safety and security. In this role, she oversaw efforts in Michigan to combat what was perceived as sexually immoral at the time, including prostitution, pornography, and contraception. In this capacity, Ballard led the fight to get the state to increase the age of consent which, as in many other states, was only 10 years old. While she advocated that it should be raised to 18, in the end, it was raised to 14 in 1887. Her speech to the state legislature was so earnest and eloquent that a Senate lawyer requested it be published in leaflet form so that it could be distributed to the state's lawyers. Within 30 years, most states would raise the age of consent to 16 or 18.

Ballard continued her work as a physician and surgeon, and as a social activist and community leader, for nearly 40 years. When she retired from medicine in 1923, the Ingham County Medical Society gave her an honorary life membership, in recognition of her "long useful and ethical career." Ballard died in 1934 at age 86. In honor of her special place in Lansing's history, she was inducted into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame in 2012.

Selected References

Ballard, D. La Pierre. *L. Anna Ballard, M.D.* March 12, 2004. <https://www.balcro.com/anna.html>

[*Portrait and Biographical Album of Ingham and Livingston Counties, Michigan*](#). Chicago: Chapman Bros., 1891.