

## **Julia Latta Tinnin– African American Nurse Trailblazer**



Julia A. Latta was born around 1867 in Hillsborough to Daniel and Julia (some sources say Peggy) Latta. Both of her parents were formerly enslaved and working as “farmhands” after the Civil War. Due to hard work and determination, Daniel Latta acquired land which he bequeathed to his heirs. Julia probably attended the Quaker Freedman’s School in Hillsborough before enrolling in the Saint Agnes Hospital School of Nursing in nearby Raleigh in 1898. She was the sole graduate of the school in 1900.

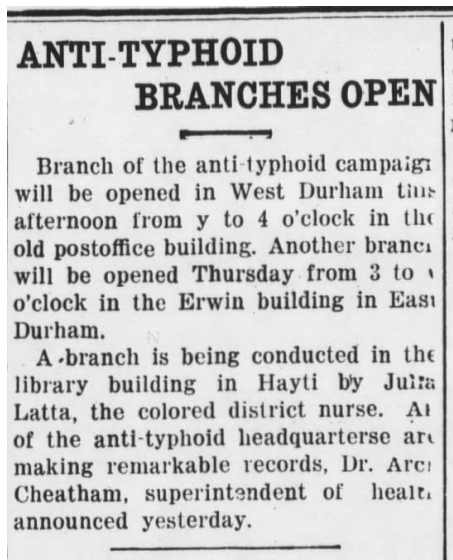
At that time there was not a nursing registration law in place, so she practiced private duty nursing as a “Trained Nurse”. In 1901 Tinnin began her hospital nursing career at the new Lincoln Hospital in Durham and soon became the Matron. Tinnin was one of two employees - the other was the janitor. She took care of patients, cooked the meals, did the laundry and whatever else was necessary to keep the hospital running. In addition to overseeing all aspects of hospital management, in 1903, she and the physicians at Lincoln Hospital opened a nurse training program. Tinnin was responsible for student admissions, curricula, clinical experiences

and living arrangements. During her tenure as the Matron (superintendent) of Lincoln Hospital and Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing, 1903-1911, seventeen nurses graduated from the program.

After she left Lincoln Hospital, Tinnin went back to less stressful private duty nursing for four years. In July 1915, in a very unusual and progressive move at that time, the relatively new Durham County Health Department employed Tinnin as Durham's first African American public health nurse. The African American Medical Society in Durham supported her appointment.

Brown (2008) described her work there:

she took health care into the community and led the effort to eradicate disease and other health problems that plagued African Americans. When black people refused to go to either facility, the hospital or the county health offices, Latta set up headquarters outside of both. For instance, she led an antityphoid campaign at the library in Hayti in 1918. In addition to making home visits, organizing antituberculosis campaigns, and leading health education programs, public health nurses performed dental and medical examinations and provided treatment at clinics, churches, and schools.



[The Herald-Sun](#)  
6 Aug 1918, p. 6

Accountings of her activities as a public health nurse were frequently reported in the local newspapers. Two examples are below.

**REPORT OF JULIA LATTA FOR  
THE MONTHS OF NOVEMBER  
AND DECEMBER, 1916.**

Visits made—November, 228; December, 300. Baths given—November, 18; December, 10. Tuberculosis reported—November, 4; December, 1. Number quarantined—November, 30; December, 20. Fumigations—November, 7; December, 2. Number scarlet fever quarantine—November, 4; December, 1. Suspected typhoid fever—December, 1.

Visited twenty-one county schools and gave twenty health talks, distributed health literature in each school, made four visits to the city schools, twenty visits to sanatorium. Sent one to hospital and one to sanatorium.

On account of epidemic of measles there were quite a number of persons in need, but these needs were met by private donations from A. M. Moore, John Merrick and C. C. Spaulding and by Captain W. M. Bouterse who helped several. During the Christmas holidays through the aid of the White Rock missionary circle and the colored City Aid society and the above named men the poor were given forty cooked dinners, twenty-five packages of groceries, containing flour, lard, sugar, tea, coffee and cabbage, thirty-five bags of fruit, fourteen loads of wood and one-half ton of coal. I am glad to state that I find the sanitary condition much improved and many anxious to comply with the law and carry out instructions given.

Respectfully submitted,  
**JULIA LATTA.**

(Durham Morning Herald, January 2, 1917, p.8).

REPORT OF MRS. CLYDE DICKINSON—COUNTY NURSE.

	Jan.	Feb.
No. visits	172	185
No. tubercular case reported	6	6
No. cases smallpox	—	—
No. cases chickenpox	8	18
No. cases scarlet fever	7	2
No. cases typhoid fever	2	0
No. cases pellagra	1	0
No. cases diphtheria	7	1
No. cases spinal meningitis	0	2
No. fumigations	12	7

REPORT OF **JULIA LATTA**—COLORED NURSE.

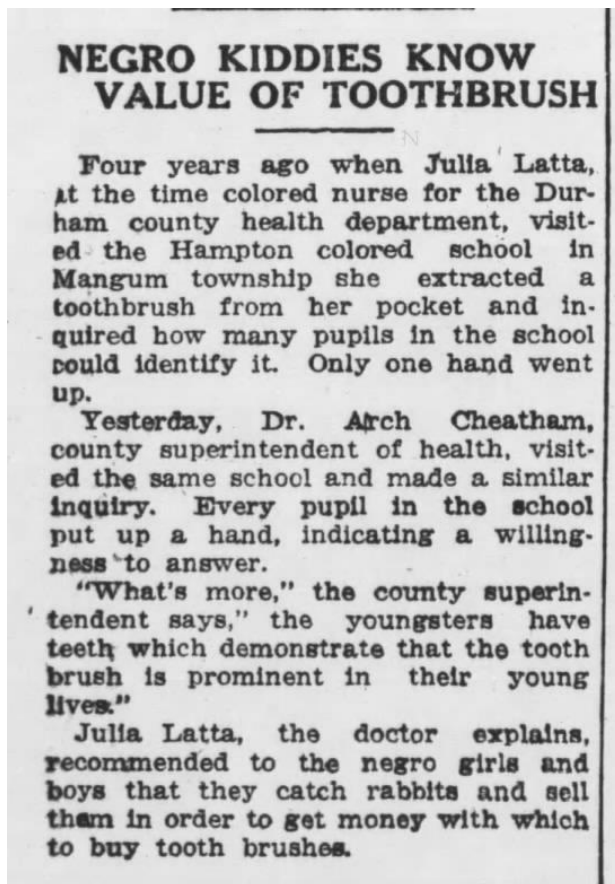
No. tubercular cases	10	3
No. cases mumps	3	0
No. rooms fumigated	2	8
No. pellagra cases	2	0
No. patients sent to hospital	0	3
No. visits	201	216

Respectfully submitted,

**A. CHEATHAM,**

Superintendent of Health.

The impact of her health lessons on school children are demonstrated in the following clipping.



[The Herald-Sun](#)

30 Nov 1921, p. 6

Latta did extraordinary work during the "Spanish" flu pandemic of 1918-1920. She worked with the American Red Cross and the Durham County Health Department to open an Emergency Hospital to care for the huge numbers of victims stricken with the flu. The Emergency Hospital for African Americans in Durham was established at the Whitted School, the largest and best equipped African American school in town. Her contributions were noted in a letter to the Durham Herald-Sun newspaper on March 7, 1920.

"The fullest measure of the spirit of service has been, as in times past, manifested by **Julia Latta**. Her presence in the hospital from two to four times a day, and the constant service of Freeland Bailey, proved to be the balance wheel to the organization and morale of our nurses. But for the personal work of the above named trained nurses, the death roll at the Whitted emergency hospital, in all probability would have been greater. They are indeed the 'uncrowned heroines' in the drive between life and death.

Tinnin left the County Health Department for a job as an industrial nurse at the American Tobacco Company in Durham but did not stay long. (Durham Morning Herald, 11-11-1920, p.9). The local chapter of the American Red Cross hired Tinnin in November 1920. Available records confirm that she was the first permanent African American Red Cross nurse in North Carolina. She held this job until she married and left North Carolina in 1925.

The Red Cross also announced yesterday that Julia Latta, colored industrial nurse of the American Tobacco company in this city has been duly appointed a Red Cross nurse in this city. She will begin her new duties immediately. So far as is known locally, she is the first colored Red Cross nurse appointed in North Carolina.

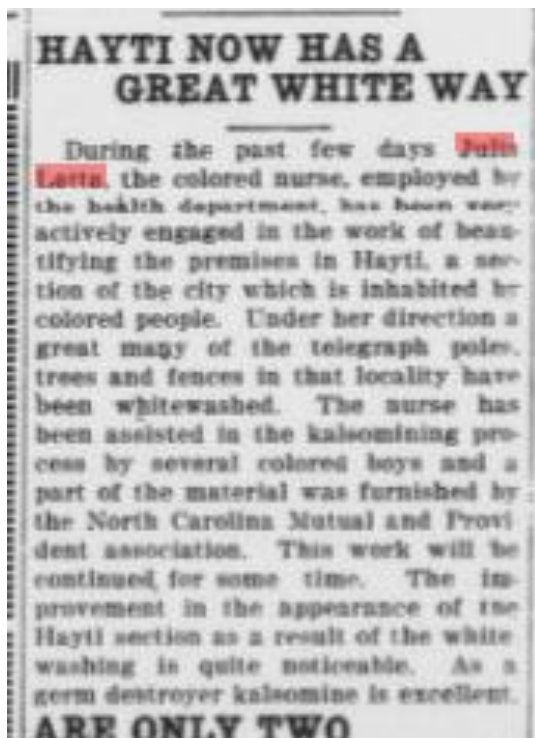
The Durham Morning Herald  
11-11-1920, p.9

In addition to her pioneering career, Tinnin was very active in the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN) and its North Carolina affiliate. At the 4th annual NACGN meeting in 1912 in Washington, DC, Tinnin spoke on "How can the Association be made beneficial to its members" as well as another talk on "Nursing ethics". At the 1916 meeting in New York City Tinnin "presented a very spicy paper" on "Public health nursing and sanitation in the south". At the first Annual Convention of the North Carolina Association of Colored



Graduate Nurses (NCACGN) in Winston-Salem in 1923 she was elected Vice President of the organization and voted to represent the North Carolina Chapter at the national convention later that year. In 1925 she served on both the executive committee and the finance committee of the NCACGN.

Tinnin was also very active in the Durham Community. She was the Vice President of the Durham Negro Civic League which was responsible for National Negro Health Week activities. These included county-wide clean up days, delivering educational programs about various health matters to schools, churches and civic groups, and providing free lime for citizens to use for whitewashing homes and outhouses. She also worked with voluntary health agencies fighting to reduce tuberculosis, typhoid and other common diseases



The Durham Sun  
April 27, 1916 p.10

In 1925, Latta (age about 55) married Lewis Tinnin (age about 65). As part of the Great Migration, Mr. Tinnin was living and working in Chicago at the time of their marriage and Latta joined him there. No available records show her working as a nurse in Chicago. She died in there on August 31, 1939, and her remarkable career has been all but forgotten.

Tinnin was the daughter of formerly enslaved parents, who grew up in a sharecropping family in rural North Carolina shortly after the end of the Civil War. In the 25 years after she graduated from nursing school she managed a hospital, established and operated a nursing school, became the first African American public health nurse in Durham County and became the first permanent American Red Cross nurse in North Carolina. She was an active and valuable leader of her professional organizations and held offices in community organizations as well. Julia Latta Tinnin deserves to be remembered and honored.

Newspaper articles with significant mentions of Tinnin:

Durham Morning Herald/ Durham Sun

11-21-1915, p. 8,

2-20-16 p. 5

3-7-1916, p. 10

4-27- 1916, p.7,

5-9-1917, p.

7-11-1917, p.7,

11-22-18, p. B 2

5, 3-4-1919, p. 7

3-7-1020, p.11

Reference list

Brown, L. (2008). *Upbuilding Black Durham*. The University of North Carolina Press.



