

HERITAGE BUILDINGS REPORT: THE GENERAL HOSPITAL, ST. JOHN'S

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The foundations on which the General Hospital were laid go back to well over 150 years. The need for a General hospital was first raised in 1808, but it was not until 1813 that a building was erected under the chairmanship of Doctor William Carson. The Riverhead Hospital as it was known was used until 1888 when it had become inhabitable and a menace, so that it was burnt under the direction of the Fire Brigade. In 1870 when the battalions were withdrawn from St. John's the military hospital was turned over to the Government. It was fit only for temporary use so the Riverhead hospital continued to be used.

The military hospital built in 1851 is one of the oldest buildings left standing in St. John's. It is of heavy stone construction and was built by the workers who built the Anglican Cathedral, the Roman Catholic Basilica and the Colonial Building. From 1871 to 1874 renovations and additions were carried out and it became known as the Forest Road or Quidi Vidi Hospital. In the 1880's the name was changed to the General Hospital. Patients were admitted in 1874. The renovations included a hot air furnace, installation of toilets, a kitchen, pantry and linen rooms. There were still many inadequacies in the Hospital and in his 1879 report Dr. Charles Crowdy, the first Resident Medical Superintendent requested "separate surgical wards so that doctors could operate in a proper operating room, rather than in a ward with other patients and behind a baize screen."



In 1893 Agnes Cowan died- she had been Matron of the Riverhead Hospital from 1861 and had moved to the General Hospital in 1871. After her death a group of her friends founded the Cowan Mission. They raised funds for a suitable memorial to her in the General Protestant Cemetery. The Cowan Mission Ladies were promoters of the General Hospital and they proposed that as a mark of Queen Victoria's Jubilee a women's ward in the hospital would be an appropriate memorial. The Cowan Mission was successful in raising enough money by public subscription and private donations to cover the cost of a ward. From the women of Newfoundland came \$4715.81; Mrs. R.G. Reid gave \$5000; \$4000 from the estate of Miss Isabella Alexander of Bonavista; and \$5000 from the government. The cornerstone was laid on June 24th 1897 and opened in August of 1898. The Victoria Wing has two wards, Victoria for the Queen and Alexander for Miss Alexander's donation.

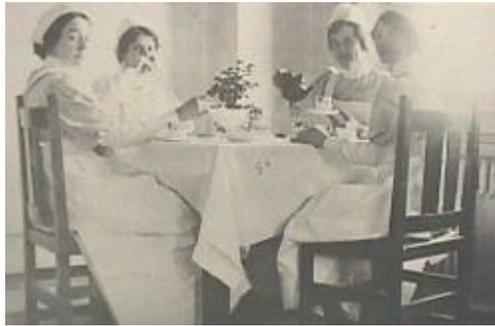


In 1903 Miss Mary Southcott was appointed Superintendent of Nurses and one of her first priorities was to start a Training School for nurses. Consequently she chose two of the Hospital staff and two from outside and began the first Training School in Newfoundland. The first graduates completed their training in 1906. Miss Southcott knew that a residence was an essential part of the training, and at the time the nurses were housed on the Alexander Ward in less than ideal conditions. Miss Southcott had graduated from the London Hospital in 1901 and had the privilege of meeting with Florence Nightingale, so she was a firm believer in Miss Nightingale's method of training nurses. Recommendations for a residence finally came in 1911 when the corner stone was laid and the following year it was opened and named The King Edward VII Residence. There was accommodation for 42 nurses. The Sisters or Head Nurses occupied the first floor while the nurses (students) had rooms on the second and third floors. There was a sitting room and a dining room complete with white linens for the tables.

In 1909 four wards were opened. The increase in demand for hospital care and advances in surgery and anesthesia put heavy demands on the existing building. The Victoria Wing had a small operating room but it could only be used when conditions were suitable and recommendations for a proper operating room had been made time and again. The new building had a proper Operating Room, a surgeon's change room, a sterilizing room and a room for anesthetics. The surgical patients were on the same floor as the Operating Room so that clean and septic cases could be separated. These wards, four of them were named for Agnes Cowan and three doctors who were prominent in the hospital, Dr. William Carson, Dr. Charles Crowdy and Dr. Henry Shea.

Following the move of the General Hospital to the Health Sciences Centre in 1978 the old wards were no longer used for patients but from 1981 to 1997 Cowan Ward housed the Lillian Stevenson Archives/Museum, a project of the School of Nursing Alumni begun in 1981 to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the School of Nursing. Lillian Stevenson of Harbour Grace graduated from the School in 1921 and worked in the hospital for many years during which she collected papers reports and artifacts, which became the nucleus for Archives/Museum. Unfortunately, despite efforts to save the old historic wards they were demolished in the fall of 1997 to make space for a new heating plant for the L.A. Miller Centre.

There were no new buildings at the General until 1939-1940, when a new nurse's residence was opened. In addition to rooms for the graduates and students, it had the first proper school. The basement had a classroom, demonstration room, library, diet kitchen and a recreation room. The first instructor was appointed in 1935. Miss Mona Smith a graduate of the school taught nursing, while as had been the practice over the years the doctors taught medicine, surgery, obstetrics and other subjects needed. The nurses were supervised on the wards by the Head Nurses. This system of training nurses continued until the 1950's when Newfoundland became part of Canada and there were opportunities to observe methods of nurses training in Canada.



Despite no new buildings the General offered Surgical and medical care in 128 beds. In 1921 the first artificial limb department was set up in the basement of Carson Ward. Two veterans of the First World War, Richard Tilley and Richard Walsh were sent off to learn how to make prostheses. The next new building for the hospital was opened in 1947 and brought the bed capacity to 350. The new wing had an Operating Room Suite, a new cafeteria, kitchen, laboratory, physiotherapy and x-ray departments and a Central Supply Room opened to sterilize surgical trays for use on the Wards. Following Confederation, a number of additions and improvements were made to the General. The Canadian Navy Hospital on Forest Road was given over to the General for use for orthopedic patients. The Fever Hospital became part of the General in the 1960's. A Veterans Wing was added in the early 60's and a newer diagnostic and treatment wing came in 1961. At its peak the General had close to 600 beds. In 1967, with the Medical School beginning at Memorial University of Newfoundland, there was a need for a dedicated Teaching Hospital. Discussions between Memorial, the Government and the General Hospital Corporation resulted in a new General Hospital being built on the Campus of Memorial and in the Health Sciences Centre. The former General Hospital was named the Dr. L.A. Miller Centre for convalescent, rehabilitation and the Veterans Wing recently renamed the Caribou Pavilion. The older buildings are vacant and await other uses to preserve their antiquity.

No history would be complete without mentioning the people who worked at the Hospital over the years. Agnes Cowan - Matron from 1861 to 1893 – was famed for her dedication. She had no formal training but had been taught by her sister Janet - whom she succeeded as Matron of the River Head Hospital. Her unfailing energy and consideration for others resulted in the formation of the Cowan Mission when she died at age 54. The Cowan Mission built a convalescent home for ladies close to the General. It was used until 1960's when it was demolished to make way for the new Nurses Residence which opened in 1964 and named Southcott Hall.

As an interesting note - the corner stone of the convalescent home was laid on May 24, 1903 by Sir Cavendish Boyle. At this ceremony Mrs. Harvey made the opening speech which was the first time a woman addressed a public gathering in Newfoundland.

Mary Meager Southcott was born in St. John's. She was appointed Superintendent of Nurses in 1903. Dr. Lawrence Keegan was appointed Medical Superintendent in 1910. He spent the first few years travelling

to the United States and England viewing hospitals and their operations. He also contracted blood poisoning during an operation which led eventually to the amputation of his leg. He returned to work in 1913 and before long he and Miss Southcott were at odds over responsibilities. Miss Southcott had had hers outlined upon her appointment but Dr. Keegan failed to read them. The disagreement between them eventually led to the setting up of a Board of Inquiry to look into the affairs of the Hospital. The recommendations included the appointment of a Board of Directors to oversee the running of the hospital and clearly defined duties of the Medical and Nursing Superintendents. Miss Southcott resigned and opened a private hospital in her parents' home at 28 Monkstown Road.



Miss Southcott was succeeded by Mrya Taylor a graduate of the school in 1910. Miss Taylor's duties were in detail - she was to visit the nurses home and the wards daily, to ensure scrupulous cleanliness, to scrutinize applications and admit probationers, prepare and give lectures (3 evenings a week) take disciplinary action where appropriate, keep a register of all probationers and nurses and make comments on character and performance, make all nursing assignments of duty and off duty hours, be responsible for all supplies of linen, examine and sign all requisitions for drugs and dressings and send them to the Medical Superintendent, and perform other such duties, etc. etc. When Miss Taylor's Assistant resigned she was not replaced. It was no wonder that her health failed and she was exhausted. Miss Taylor died in 1939.

Dr. Charles Crowdy was the first Resident Medical Superintendent to be appointed to the Forest Road Hospital. His report of 1879 requested an operating room. Crowdy Ward, through the years was a men's surgical ward.

Dr. William Carson is probably remembered more for his political career than his medical. He was appointed surgeon to the St. John's Volunteers in 1808, the year he arrived in St. John's. Dr. Carson spoke out against many of the practices in the Colony and wrote frequently to London protesting them; such as the system of appointing judges, the fact that there was no municipal government; that the dissenting clergy could not marry couples, and most forcefully in the need for Newfoundland to have its own Responsible Government. This last was finally achieved and although Carson was not elected in the first vote he was later elected in a by election and became Speaker of the House of Assembly. His house was in the site of the present Pius X School then known as Rostellen. Carson died in 1843 and was buried in the Anglican Cemetery Churchyard. A plaque in his memory is to be seen on the wall of the Cathedral opposite the Newfoundland Museum.

Dr. Henry Shea was a grandson of Dr. Carson, and was appointed Resident Physician in 1889. He is noted for his introduction of antiseptic/Aseptic surgery and in performing abdominal operations. He was very supportive of the Cowan Mission in its efforts to build the Victoria Wing. In the Nursing Archives/Museum the patients admission register for 1886 to 1892 show that the most common disease

requiring hospitalization are; respiratory diseases, accidents, abscesses and ulcers, scrofula and nervous and brain diseases next.

The General Hospital is now part of the Health Care Corporation of St. John's. The School of Nursing will graduate the last class in June of 1998. The history of both are intertwined and preserved in the Lillian Stevenson Nursing Archives/Museum in pictures and records.

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