

## THE VICTORIA GENERAL HOSPITAL - GLIMPSSES OF THE PAST

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*Halifax, Nova Scotia*

A wave of applause greeted Premier R. L. Stanfield's unveiling of a plaque which officially opened the new \$13,000,000 Centennial Addition to the Victoria General Hospital on April 15, 1967.

"This addition was opened by  
Hon. R. L. Stanfield  
Premier  
on April 15, 1967  
the One-Hundredth Anniversary of  
the admission of this hospital's  
first patient."

The story of the Victoria General began exactly 100 years ago from that moment when a farmer from St. Margaret's Bay, Mr. Isaac Hubley, hobbled painfully into the surgical ward of the then small brick building known as the Provincial and City Hospital. The man suffered from a "strophulus condition of the ankle joint", and his leg was put in splints. Decision against operation was made (fortunately, no doubt, for the patient) and he was discharged "Unimproved" to his farm. He did not return. Ten days later the first medical patient was admitted suffering from a disease "common" at the time, and thus began the friendly competition between the disciples of Medicine and Surgery. During that first year 227 patients were treated. One-hundred years later this had grown to 40,000.

To say that the story of the hospital began in 1867 is not wholly accurate, for the foundation of the institution - both literally and figuratively - had been laid before that.

The first hospital in Halifax was erected in 1790, during the first year of the city. It was a small wooden building near the site of government house. By 1765, Halifax boasted no less than two hospitals, both located at the foot of Cornwallis Street. These two Institutions, known oddly as the Red and Green Hospitals, served the city for a number of years.

In 1815, an advertisement in the *Acadian Recorder* boasted of the merits of the "Merchant Seaman's and Provincial Private Hospital at the southern extremity of Water Street." Patients who were accepted for admission to this place of healing ("application for admission may be made to either the Surgeons at their house or at the hospital") were assured of "properly qualified nurses and attendants and a diet and regimen adapted to the needs of the patients. . .and assistance of 3 medical men."

It was later in the century, some 25 years later, that talk began of setting up a permanent public institution for the "care and treatment of diseased citizens." The beginnings were slow and difficult. The year 1841 saw talks first begin, but nothing substantial was accomplished until 1844 when a meeting of the Medical Profession of Halifax declared itself in favour of some scheme to establish a city hospital. The idea was at first received with some enthusiasm; the mayor even donated his year's salary of £300 towards construction of a "lunatic asylum or any other public charity". Gradually however, the idea was lost in a mass of debates and bureaucracy.

The birth of the new hospital was a most difficult one, and there appeared to be some confusion as to who was to attend the delivery. The City Fathers and the Provincial Legislators bickered back and forth until finally a site (the present one) was chosen. At that time this was a large, open and rather boggy field where the sport-lovers of the day liked to shoot game-birds. The building was completed in 1857 and cost \$38,000, paid by the city of Halifax.

But trouble was just beginning. Heating was poor; the stoves smoked. Gas and water lacked, and drainage was inadequate. The public purse was again dipped into for the purpose of repairs, and the average Hali-

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gonian became antagonistic towards the structure - indeed, towards the whole idea of paying for a hospital. As a result, the new building lay practically vacant from 1860-1866.

But there were some persistent supporters of the hospital idea who would not give up. One of them was the city Health Officer, Dr. Charles Tupper. Dr. Tupper petitioned the government time and again for improvement in the city's facilities for treatment and care of disease. Up to this time and since 1790, the sick, poor and insane were crowded into a building on the corner of Queen Street and Spring Garden Road the "Poor's Asylum" or, as it was commonly called, "Bridewell". This multi-purpose structure served also as a prison.

Dr. Tupper and his associates, aided by an outbreak of Asiatic Cholera during the winter of 1866, won their point, and the organization of the hospital was completed by 1866. Provision was made for 50 beds in the main building, while those suffering from communicable diseases were housed in a "wooden cottage" behind the hospital.

The Institution was ready to open its doors in April of 1867, and on April 15th, Mr. Isaac Huble, the gentleman whom we have already met, had the honour of being the first patient of the Provincial and City Hospital of Halifax, N. S.

By modern standards, the new Hospital was modest indeed, but the project seemed to fare well. A year after it received its first patient, the Medical Faculty of the Halifax Medical College opened and used the facilities of the hospital for teaching its first class of 20 students.

As with all hospitals of the day, conditions were far from ideal at times. The staff worked long hours for even less pay than today. The wards were difficult to keep clean and this added to the nurse's work; she did the housecleaning too. The walls were white-washed, so in order to remove dirt or "soiling" one removed the whitewash too! The hospital was heated by coal and wood stoves - 24 of them - which all required tending. The nurses slept in shifts and shared beds; beds occupied by day-nurses at night were used during the day by night-nurses. The male nurse, so the record has it, slept in the bathroom.

Excellent records of patients were kept, and detailed case histories are preserved to

this day. The most minute details of the patient's life are recorded in journals in neat and legible longhand. Consider, for example, the case of Miss M.M., a 22-year old "Cape Bretonian" whose occupation was listed as being "of ill repute" and whose diagnosis was "social disease". The History of the Present Illness goes on to tell of her "poor beginnings" her immigration to the city to "seek gainful employment" and her subsequent sad fall into "the ways of sin and degradation". Hot packs were the cure; but such treatment was suddenly interrupted, for, as the nurses' notes so succinctly record: "Patient expelled from hospital for misconduct."

There was no nonsense - you either came to be treated and behaved yourself - or you left. And some patients did just that. Many case records end with a brief, "Patient eloped". Such happenings seemed rather common before surgery, so much so that a special eye was kept on the prospective surgical patient to insure his being present for the operation.

Discipline was maintained with an iron hand at the institution, but with the welfare of the patient in mind, of course. Passes were sometimes issued for excursions into the city. But even these carried risks; sometimes the patient simply did not return. At other times, worse fate befell him. Take the case of Mr. J.F., 22 years of age, a sailor. The nurse records: "He was a most intemperate man, as is the way of sailors." He too was given a ticket of leave from the hospital for several hours, but, as the record states, "the rascal arrived back in such an inebriated condition that he was not permitted to return to the ward." Those were the good old days!

The hospital grew, but slowly at first. A change in name was considered when operation of the hospital fell onto the shoulders of the Province of Nova Scotia. It was in 1887 by an act of Legislature that the Provincial and City Hospital became known as the Victoria General Hospital "in recognition of the Jubilee of Her most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria. . ."

The following year, 1888, saw the construction of the north and south wings extending out from the main building (now OPD). Two years later, in 1890, a significant chapter in the history of the hospital was opened with the founding during that year of

the Training School for Nurses, one of the very first in Canada.

The School for Nurses had a modest beginning. There were 6 enrolled in the first class. Within 70 years the school was to become one of the three largest in Canada. Compared with today, the curriculum was not extensive. Nurses were put immediately to work on the wards to learn their trade the hard way - on the job. They had little or no introduction to the ways of hospitals, or to the ways of some of the patients. It was with some misgivings that the young nurse was introduced to her profession. The unfamiliarity with her environment which she must have felt was reflected in the report issued in 1896 by the Board of Commissioners who were charged by the government to debate and decide (among other things) whether the nurse should be obliged to give bedpans and urinals to male patients. How times have changed. . . .

From this time onward the story of the hospital became one of progress and expansion. In 1892 the Centre Building (now OPD or Jubilee) was raised to a third storey to provide accommodation for private patients and expanded operating room facilities. In 1904 the first X-ray equipment was installed.

Facilities for Pathology at the Victoria General were not very extensive until the year 1912 when the Nova Scotia Government began construction of a Provincial Laboratory completed in 1914. During these years, and until the construction of the new main building in 1948, underground tunnels connecting the various buildings were non-existent. As a result, corpses had to be carried from the wards outside and across to the morgue located in the Laboratory building. The story is told of a mishap which occurred while such a task was being carried out one dark evening in a blinding snowstorm. Two porters were cautiously making their way through the driving snow when one had the misfortune to slip and fall into a snowbank, followed by the white-shrouded corpse. Needless to say, their cargo was well buried and unable to be found. The intensive search precipitated by such an occurrence lasted well into the night, but ended with the recovery of the body after the storm had abated.

Fifty years had passed and the hospital was still a small brick building in the middle of

a hayfield when the disastrous Halifax Explosion of 1917 occurred. An operation was about to begin in the small third floor O.R. when the skylight above the table crashed in with the force generated by the explosion in the Harbour. One of the Surgeons threw himself across the patient to protect her from falling glass, and fortunately no one was seriously hurt. The hospital was besieged by thousands of the survivors, and the corridors were lined for days with the injured. The medical facilities were taxed beyond capacity, but relief arrived within several days from points throughout Canada and the U.S.

Plans were made in late 1919 for further expansion of the hospital buildings. These were finally realized in 1921 and '22 by the addition to the Nurses' Residence and the opening of the "Private Pavilion". The Pavilion survived to house the Departments of Neurosurgery and Psychiatry until the opening of the Centennial building in 1967. It is presently being used as temporary quarters for Internes. Completing this phase of reconstruction was an addition to the Pathology laboratory in 1924.

In its edition of May 25, 1948, the Halifax-Herald carried this story: "A chill wind swept through the leafless trees as officials and representative citizens gathered at the spacious grounds of the Victoria General Hospital for the official opening of that Institution."

The opening of the 15-storey building ended four years of construction. The north and south wings of the original building were demolished and the centre building was renovated to house the Out-Patient Department. The new modern building boasted an Emergency 24-hour ambulance service, large new X-ray facilities, and very up-to-date Operating Theatres.

An imposing 12-storey School of Nursing, probably the best known of the hospital's buildings (especially to the young men of Halifax) was built in 1952 and greatly added to the facilities available for the training of Nurses. Further construction lay ahead, for in 1956 an addition to the West Wing was constructed to house the Department of Radiation Therapy and Medical Records.

With the increasing demand for hospital space and the intended expansion of Dalhousie Medical School, plans were begun in the late 1950's for a large new addition to the

already large hospital complex. After several years of planning and many committee meetings later, sod was broken for the construction early in 1963. Within four years, and in the Centennial year of both Canada and the hospital, a plaque was unveiled which officially opened the new Centennial Addition to the Victoria General Hospital and commemorated the 100th. anniversary of the admission of the first patient.

Whereas Mr. Hubley, the first patient, hobbled up to the ward with his strophulus ankle joint in 1867, patients are now taken through a modern admitting department to their room, or are received in a well-equipped and efficient Emergency Department (treating 20,000 patients per year). The patient of 1967 sleeps in an electric bed, adjustable to any height, on coated foam rubber mattresses. An intercom between each patient and the nurse allows almost instant communication. Twenty-five new Operating Theatres with the latest in hospital equipment serve the patient's surgical needs. An Intensive Care Unit with ultra-modern monitoring equipment and well-trained nursing personnel insure maximum patient care.

The opening of these new medical facilities does not complete the programme of being in touch with the times. The old main building, now known as Victoria, will be completely renovated, allowing expansion of the hospital to almost 900 beds. Closely linked with such expansion is the construction of the new Nova Scotia Laboratories Institute which will provide greatly expanded and very modern facilities for Laboratory Medicine and Pathology for the hospital and the province.

Throughout the 100 years of its existence, the Victoria General Hospital has served the

people of Nova Scotia and the population of the Atlantic Provinces of Canada. This Institution has grown from a brick building in a cow-field to one of the largest and best known hospitals in Canada. For 100 years its facilities have trained nurses and served physicians, and provided for treatment and healing of the sick. While we reflect on a century of steady progress, let us consider too just where the patient fits into this tangle of intercom cords, bedpans, monitors and pocket-pagers. The hospital has served us in Medicine well; it has provided facilities for our education. But it has not *taught* us. We must always remember that our teachers have been the patients of this Institution - from the 227 of 1867 to the 40,000 of one hundred years later. To these many thousands of Victoria General patients - our best professors - this short, and inadequate history of this hospital is dedicated.

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