



# Nursing Diaries:

## CELEBRATING A HISTORY OF CARING AND PROFESSIONALISM

Probably no other career offers as many opportunities as nursing. A well-educated nurse can do a thousand different things in a thousand different places—and still work within this unique profession. For all the incredible things that nurses have done and continue to do, few of us know how nursing began in the United States, or what it took for these selfless people to be there when you—or a loved one—needs help the most.

Here, then, is a short walk through the profession's U.S. history, brought to you with the assistance of Sandra B. Lewenson, Ed.D., R.N., F.A.A.N., former president of the American Association for the History of Nursing (AAHN) and currently a professor of nursing at Pace University's Lienhard School of Nursing.

# Nursing

# HISTORY



Bellevue Hospital School of Nursing students with a patient, c.1960

## 1860s

When the Civil War began, nurses mainly from the religious orders Sisters of Mercy and Sisters of Charity volunteered to ply their skills, but were soon overwhelmed. In 1861, Dorothea Dix was appointed the Union's Superintendent of Female Nurses, and worked tirelessly to organize and staff corps of volunteers. While women nurses were



Louisa May Alcott

usually assigned to base hospitals far from the action, some, like Clara Barton, known as the "Angel of the Battlefield," went behind the front lines and served in battlefield hospitals. Among notable nurses during the war: author Louisa May Alcott, runaway slave Harriet Tubman and poet Walt Whitman.

## 1870s

With the opening of three nursing schools in 1873, the modern nursing movement was born. Patterned after Nightingale principles, the training schools were established at Bellevue Hospital in New York City, Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and New Haven Hospital in Connecticut. Soon many more hospital-based diploma schools of nursing, where students learned through practice, were created.

Top and far right photos courtesy Bellevue Alumnae Center for Nursing History; Foundation of NYS Nurses

## 1890s

To standardize and improve nursing education and practice, nurses began to organize professional organizations. The National League for Nursing was created in 1893 to establish and maintain a universal standard of education for nurses. Also that year, Lillian Wald and Mary Brewster established the Visiting Nurses Service for the immigrants and opened the Henry Street Settlement on New York City's Lower East Side. Wald's determination to serve a woefully underserved population led her to persuade the

Board of Education to bring nurses into the public school system.

In 1896 the American Nurses Association was formed to maintain the standards of nursing practice. The organization, still thriving, advocates advancing the profession and addressing ethics, public policy and the economic and general welfare of nurses.

In 1899, Teacher's College at Columbia University offered a course in nursing economics to give nurses additional education so that they might become teachers of nursing and/or hospital administrators.

## 1880s

In 1881, Clara Barton and a group of friends and colleagues founded the American Red Cross. Barton would head it for some two decades.



Bellevue Hospital School of Nursing Class of 1893



Mary Breckinridge, founder of the Frontier Nursing Service, 1930

## Early 1900s

As nursing organizations joined the women's suffrage movement, nurses such as Lavinia Dock not only marched in parades but were imprisoned with other suffragists. Until they were able to vote, nurses had to push for reforms through lobbying their legislators. Among critical issues were the nurse practice acts, designed to standardize requirements of nursing instruction and distinguish trained nurses from the untrained. The first bills were passed in states such as New York and North Carolina around 1903.

Strides in education continued: in 1910 a Department of Nursing was established at Teacher's College in Columbia University, educating a whole cadre of nursing leaders that would influence the development of nursing throughout the world.

In 1912, continuing the work she had started at the turn of the century, Lillian Wald helped create the National Organization for Public Health Nursing. The organization set professional standards for visiting nurses around the nation.

The onset of World War I created a dramatic rise in the need for nurses, who were now needed at

home as well as abroad. In 1917, American nurses went overseas when the United States sent members of the Army Nurse Corps to Europe to care for the wounded. Accelerated programs like the summer school for nurses at Vassar were created to train nurses faster: college graduates could now fulfill their requirements in less than the standard three years. In 1918, the Army School of Nursing was established.



Unidentified World War I nurses in gas masks

## 1920s–1930s

Over the next several years, many colleges and universities introduced programs combining a nursing diploma with college coursework. In 1924, Yale University opened the Yale School of Nursing, considered to be one of the first separate departments of nursing. The field of nursing expanded: in 1925, Mary Breckinridge organized the Frontier Nursing Service in Appalachia, which specialized in midwifery. In the 1930s, as the country was seized by the Great Depression, graduating nurses began to find jobs in hospitals.

## 1940s

As the United States entered into World War II it faced another critical nursing shortage unless it could train nurses in record numbers, and in record time. In March 1943, Representative Frances Payne Bolton of Ohio introduced a bill into Congress that would create a government program for the training of nurses. By June the resulting Cadet Nurse Program was formed.

At war's end, interest in nursing declined: peacetime shortages, therefore, would continue throughout



A visiting nurse of the Henry Street Settlement, c.1930.

the decade. Among factors for the decline: nurses wanted more education so they could more effectively in hospitals; more time in school meant less time in hospitals.

## 1950s–1960s

A 1948 doctoral dissertation by Mildred Montag, a student at Columbia University Teacher's College, had a profound affect on nursing education to come. Montag's study showed that two-year associate degree nursing programs (two-year programs) were just as effective as the three-year diploma programs in training nurses. As a result, the 1950s saw the marked increase of associate programs across the country (by the mid-1990s there were nearly 900 such programs).

With the surge of coronary and intensive care units in U.S. hospitals during the 1960s, nurses were able to adapt and improve their diagnostic and technical abilities.

In 1965 nursing education saw another milestone: the American Nurses Association adopted a position paper supporting a baccalaureate degree in nursing. Within the next few years, many hospital-based nursing programs were phased out and replaced with college-based schooling.

Top photos and bottom left courtesy Bellevue Alumnae Center for Nursing History; Foundation of NYS Nurses

## 1970s–1990s

In the early 1970s, to meet the primary health needs of the population, Nurse Practitioners (baccalaureate nurses with an added master's degree in nursing) began to assume many medical responsibilities. Today many nurse practitioners are studying to earn a Doctor of Nursing Practice.

Another nursing shortage was documented in 1990 — and an aging population's need for more and more care would continue to grow. The demand for nurses continued to be even more critical.



## 2000s

Now, nursing is turning more global, sparked by an interest in world health and continued immigration to this country. With 200-plus nursing specialties, there is an ever-increasing demand for more highly educated nurses to serve the health care needs of today's society.

# Nursing

# THE STORY